



Testimony to the Public Health Committee
In Support of *House Bill #6088: An Act Concerning a Dedicated Alcohol Tax*
to Fund Substance Abuse Treatment Programs
By Jill Spinetti, Acting President and CEO
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Good Afternoon distinguished members of the Public Health Committee. My name is Jill Spinetti and I am acting president of The Governor's Prevention Partnership. The Partnership, which is currently co-chaired by Governor Rell, was created in 1989 as a public-private partnership between state government and the business community. We are the only statewide prevention organization in Connecticut focusing on mentoring, school violence, underage drinking, high-risk drinking and drug abuse prevention.

I am here today in support of Bill #6088 and its potential to reduce underage drinking.

Connecticut's young adults have a problem with alcohol. A recent national study found that 69% of young adults aged 18-25 in Connecticut report drinking alcohol in the past month, 46% report binge drinking and 18% report that they are experiencing alcohol abuse and dependence (source: National Household Survey of Drug Use and Health, 2002). These rates are among the highest in the nation. Data from the CORE Survey conducted on Connecticut college campuses in 2004 had comparable findings: 72% of college students report that they are current drinkers and 46% had been binge drinking within the past two weeks.

A new study estimates that underage drinking costs the U.S. \$62 billion a year (source: Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 2006), with Connecticut bearing about \$600 million in costs a year (source: Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, 2004). Underage and high-risk drinkers face serious life, health and social problems, including traffic crashes, suicide, sexual assault, risky sexual behavior, violence, dropping out of school, and addiction.

Within the last two years, focus on underage drinking as a major public health issue has increased nationally and in Connecticut. The Governor's Prevention Partnership, along with hundreds of partners in law enforcement, community coalitions, state and municipal government and many others, are making substantial progress towards increasing coordination of efforts and securing additional resources to battle this problem. I'd like to draw your attention to a few recent developments including:

- A national Call to Action on Underage Drinking Prevention in 2006 issued by the U.S. Surgeon General in order to spearhead a comprehensive and coordinated, public and private response to underage drinking which has been identified as America's number one youth drug problem.
- The Sober Truth on Preventing (STOP) Underage Drinking Act, passed by Congress in 2006, co-sponsored by Senator Dodd and Congresswoman DeLauro, recognizing the need for a focused national effort.
- A team of senior state officials, led by Representative David Scribner, was recently appointed by Governor Rell to work on the issue of underage drinking at the national and state levels.
- DMHAS has received substantial funding from the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) to create a statewide prevention infrastructure to prevent underage drinking and is now working on the issue with statewide resource links and 27 communities.
- In 2006, the legislature passed the house party bill that closes a loophole in the law and adds increased enforcement and penalties for adults who provide alcohol to minors on private property.

Alcohol taxes are an effective prevention strategy to reduce alcohol consumption. Alcohol taxes function similarly to tobacco taxes—higher taxes reduce consumption and associated negative consequences, with larger effects on purchasers with the least disposable income. Because that category includes youth, the National Academies of Science's Institute of Medicine specifically recommends increasing alcohol taxes as a way to reduce public health damage resulting from underage drinking. (source: Assessing State Readiness to Act on Alcohol Tax Research Findings by Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, 2005)

There is substantial evidence that raising alcohol taxes is one of the most effective measures for reducing alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems, particularly among young people (source: Chaloupka, Saffer & Grossman, 1993, Holder, 1998). With teenagers and cigarettes, the positive cause and effect of raising taxes is well-documented. Indeed, the increase in taxes on cigarettes in Connecticut and other states is widely credited as contributing to a significant drop in teenage smoking since the late 1990s. As documented in the most recent Connecticut School Health Survey, the rate of high school students who smoke cigarettes fell to 17 percent from 25.6 percent between the years 2000 and 2005.

Yet, while there is strong evidence linking reduction in alcohol consumption and consequences to an increase in the price of alcohol, alcohol taxes in most states have not risen in decades. This is true in Connecticut which last increased its sale tax on alcohol in 1989 and currently ranks 29th out of 50 states in level of alcohol tax. There is a growing trend nationally to increase alcohol taxes. Ten states have raised taxes since 2001; 24 states earmark funds from alcohol tax collection and, of those, 10 states use the funds for alcohol programs.

While generally in Connecticut tax revenues flow into the general fund, this is also an opportunity to raise awareness about earmarking revenues to address alcohol problems through treatment, prevention and law enforcement. By just adding 5 cents additional tax per gallon of beer, CT could raise approximately \$2.9 million dollars in revenue; while this bill advocates for revenue to fund substance abuse treatment programs which I wholeheartedly support, I would also ask you to consider dedicating revenue to prevention programs since we know that for every dollar spent on alcohol and drug abuse prevention, we can save over \$4 or \$5 in costs for treatment and counseling.

There is a strong infrastructure in place to prevent underage drinking in the state and this legislation adds another critical policy strategy that is proven by research to work. I support this bill as an effective policy strategy to curb underage alcohol consumption and its harmful effects and to create a revenue stream to address alcohol problems in the state. Thank you for your support.